

Chapter 1

THEY don't tell you about stuff like this at seminary.

If they did, no one would ever graduate and pursue a job in the pastorate.

No one sane anyhow.

It was the Sunday before Christmas, and I had just delivered what I thought to be a rather eloquent sermon tying together the prophecies of Christ in Isaiah with their fruition in the New Testament. It's hard preaching Advent sermons, I've been told by much more seasoned ministers than myself, because eventually you run out of material. Matthew and Luke devote a couple of chapters to the nativity story. Mark and John don't even mention it. Sure, you can get creative and talk about the Word becoming flesh and pass that off to your congregation as a "Christmas" sermon. Or you can cleverly dig

into Old Testament prophecy, but churchgoers these days have a limited attention span when it comes to Old Testament prophecy. Or the Old Testament, period. So I was quite pleased with myself and a bit relieved that it was over. All that remained was the Christmas Eve living nativity a few short days ahead.

Or so I thought.

I am not one of those pastors who wears a robe to preach, so I don't have to defrock after the service. But I do often spend a moment in my office to loosen my tie (I am one of those pastors who still wears a tie, at least most weeks), wet my whistle, and mentally switch gears from preacher to pastor. I don't take long, because I've learned that half of the congregation rushes in stampede fashion for the doors as soon as the final "Amen" is uttered (if not before), and if I want to talk to them, I had better not dawdle. Still, I do need a moment, and find that even just a few seconds of solitude can recharge my batteries.

Which is why I was a little displeased to see Hank Summerset waiting in my office. Sitting in my chair, no less, although I try not to let

trifling actions like that bother me. Hank is one of three elders in our church, although the joke is that Mrs. Summerset runs the family and is really more of an elder than he is. Not that I make such jokes or pay attention to them, of course.

“Good morning, Hank,” I said in an effort to be cheerful. ‘Twas the season, after all.

“Morning, Pastor.”

“What can I do for you?” I asked, removing my suit jacket. I glanced in the mirror hanging on a side wall to make sure no sweat had accrued under my arms during the heated moments of preaching. None had, and I tugged at my tie to give my neck a break.

“Mrs. Summerset had an idea about the living nativity,” he said in his drawl. Hank is not from the South. It’s just my opinion that he drawls out of weariness from dealing with Mrs. Summerset, to whom he always refers as such.

“Oh,” I said. “What’s that?”

“Actually, it was more an idea about the dinner we’re providing.”

I frowned. “We’re not providing a dinner, per se, Hank.”

“I know that.”

I decided to sit down.

This Christmas, the board (me, Hank, and two other elders) had unanimously decided to have a living nativity at church on Christmas Eve. We thought a few of the ladies could make some sandwiches, maybe a couple of pots of soup that could be dished into Styrofoam cups, and we could use the entire event as a way to reach out to those who didn't have a place to go on Christmas Eve. Particularly the less fortunate. They could come in, warm up, get something to eat, and see the true meaning of Christmas in the form of our living nativity. It would provide us with a way to show them the love of Jesus in a practical way, and perhaps give us an opportunity to strike up a conversation or two. It was not a grand plan, but one our small church could pull off, in theory. Everything was finalized and mostly prepped, which is why Hank's presence and the mention of Mrs. Summerset's idea had me sitting down.

“She thought perhaps we could do more than just make sandwiches and soup.”

“Mrs. Dunham is baking cookies,” I said, hoping to mollify him.

“Oh, she thought we might make a more traditional Christmas meal. Turkey, maybe ham, potatoes and gravy, rolls, several fruits and vegetables.”

My stomach growled quietly. It does that when I’m hungry.

Or nervous.

“That does sound nice, Hank,” I admitted, “but I think we’re too late in the game to be calling an audible. Christmas Eve is four days away.”

“That’s what I told Mrs. Summerset.”

“Good,” I said with a nod. I even slapped my thighs. I started to stand.

“She was rather adamant,” he said. “Said she was going to talk to Adeline.”

As the pastor, it is my duty to be calm and composed, a shepherd to my sheep. Even in the presence of another elder, as a leader I must conduct myself with decorum. Which is why I resisted the urge to drop my head into my palm.

Adeline Pitroski is a seventy-four-year-old bundle of excessive energy. She leads a weekly Pilates class at the community center. She conducts prayer walks through the community on Tuesdays and Fridays. In spandex. She's constantly on the move, cleaning up, pitching in, finding some way to keep busy. And she organizes the heck—excuse my Latin—out of everything. From fellowship dinners to Easter brunches, women's Bible studies to women's retreats—if the church has a function, Adeline is involved to make sure it is done properly and thoroughly. The only reason she wasn't a part of the living nativity is because she was allegedly going to visit her daughter in Tampa over Christmas. And I said as much to Hank.

"She was supposed to leave Tuesday, but when she learned of our rather meager plans for Christmas Eve, she postponed her trip to help out."

"I see," I said because I couldn't think of anything else.

"They're recruiting volunteers and planning a menu. Marilyn Barkley is involved too."

Marilyn Barkley was a gourmet chef, well loved by the deaconesses for her willingness to provide quality meals to those in need. And to those not in need. Perhaps her only detriment was her domineering personality, one that usually clashed with Mrs. Summerset's. Drastically, at times, like the Harvest Pie Festival a year ago. A shame, all that pumpkin pie filling and homemade whipped topping splattered across Alan Greenberg's haymow.

"And Mrs. Summerset, Adeline, and Marilyn are all working together?" I asked.

"And recruiting volunteers," Hank repeated. He got up with some effort. "I thought you'd want to know. I tried talking them out of it, but you know Mrs. Summerset."

"I do. Thank you, Hank."

He brushed past me, and as an afterthought, patted my shoulder. "Excellent sermon, this morning, by the way."

"Oh, uh, thank you."

"Been a long time since I've heard preaching from Jeremiah."